

The final leaf of the stocky oak tree gently settled upon the snow-covered driveway, joining the rest as they all laid in solitude, littering the rough surface of the gravel exterior. It was past midnight, and all that could be seen was the faint outline of objects illuminated by the harsh light of the streetlamp. Yet there was much to be felt- the icy prickles of the falling snow mixed with a violent wind caused tiny stings of pain to whomever was out that late at night, which happened to be the unfortunate soul of a girl named Mallory.

Bundled in a parka with the hood tightly strung, Mallory looked lost. Walking slowly along the sidewalk, it was clear she had no intended destination, simply ambling through the neighborhood. With a storm of white surrounding her, Mallory was compelled to give up and just fall to the ground. However, she had a mission, and knew the only result that stopping would give her was a horrible frostbite and possible death. So she continued on, marching through the dreary night.

Trudging through the miserable weather, Mallory began to question how she landed in this dismal situation. All she carried with her was a duffel bag messily packed with clothes, a corner of a piece of paper with a name and address scribbled on it, and a yellowed picture with a ripped side depicting a smiling couple, old enough to be parents. In the picture, they seemed happy. Both were smiling into each other eyes, and barely seemed to notice the camera capturing their love. They looked at each other with adoration, clearly a couple deeply in love, and not yet exposed to the hardships of a marriage. One of the woman's hands was connected to something, but the picture cut off before the object on the other side of the rip was revealed. But that object was not of real importance to Mallory. These two figures, this happy couple, was the reason of Mallory's current circumstance. They were her birth parents.

Mallory was an adoption. Not just an adoption, a closed adoption. Her biological parents were unable to provide information for future contact, probably because it wasn't safe, and they wanted the best for Mallory. She never doubted the love of adults; seeing all the other children getting picked up from the bus stop everyday by large people who seemed to care, even *interested* in what had happened about the exciting events that a first grader had at school.

Mallory had always been a curious being ever since she was a little girl. It didn't take her long to figure out the people that raised her were not her parents- she could obviously see that her two "siblings" were shown a much larger degree of love and adoration from her "parents". Constantly feeling liked but not quite loved in the place others call home, Mallory grew up

surrounded by “what if”—what if her parents, her real parents had kept her? What would her life be like? She constantly dreamed of running away, going on a grand adventure to find her biological parents, who would surely welcome her with open arms and explain their completely understandable and acceptable reason for letting her go. Upon turning 18, leaving the house she grew up in wasn’t a question. She would finally be able to embark upon the adventure she always dreamed of, the one she was determined to make come true. Mallory requested only one thing from the two owners of the home before her departure-- to give her anything that could aid in her search for her birth parents. Their reaction is still seared into her memory, for they shared a look she couldn’t quite place, a look of fear? Sadness? Despair? But this barely unnerved her, for in the end they gave her what she wanted-- the name and address of a Thomas Walters (supposed friend and co-worker of her birth parents), and the torn picture of her birth parents when they had just moved into a new house.

Looking back now, Mallory realized it probably would’ve been a good idea to have established a plan of action before setting out on this journey to find her parents instead of blindly driving away to this address where Thomas Walters may not even live anymore. But eighteen-year-olds are not known for heedfulness, and her impulsiveness got the best of her—she drove away without looking back. Mallory’s car had broken down around an hour ago in an uninhabited area, and now she was just walking, looking for any sign of a house she could stay in for a night before sorting out her problems in the morning. After what felt like miles upon miles of aimless wandering, she finally caught sight of a large, curving driveway leading up to a house that towered over its surroundings. It was the first house Mallory had seen since her car had broken down, and as far as she could tell, the other houses were nowhere near the large one that stood in front of her now. “Surely this house has enough rooms to spare me one,” Mallory thought, “if only the owner allow me into their home.” With nothing to lose, Mallory began her ascent up the driveway, feeling increasingly smaller as she neared the imposing structure of the house.

Ding, Dong. Mallory could hear the doorbell resound throughout the dark house. A stream of blinding light flooded into the main entrance hall almost immediately, much to Mallory’s surprise. An elderly woman shuffled to the door, wrapped in a bathrobe and squinting as her eyes adjusted to the light. Opening the door, she cringed as the bitter weather swirled into her home.

“I’m terribly sorry to wake you, but I have no place to rest tonight- I was wondering if you would be so kind to let me stay for just one night,” Mallory politely asked, teeth chattering. “Why of course my poor dear, come in, quickly, before we both catch a cold,” the old woman responded. She ushered Mallory’s frozen figure into her house, and immediately there was something about the lady that made Mallory nervous. Her faint, lilting voice along with eyes that always seemed to have a vacant, faraway look would never quite meet Mallory’s eyes directly when she spoke to her. However, the woman had been nice enough to give Mallory a place to stay, and for that she dared not question the woman’s quirks as she entered the house.

The house was lavish. Dark, billowing curtains were drawn over large windows stretching from the ceiling to the floor, not allowing for any light to exit or enter. A great chandelier hung from the ceiling, showing off the grandeur and majesty of the old woman’s home. Mallory felt extremely tiny and out of place—this obviously was a woman who had lots of wealth, whereas the only things Mallory owned were some clothes, an address, and a torn old picture.

“So what brings you to this town? It’s not hardly known for a tourist spot,” the woman said, interrupting Mallory’s thoughts.

“I don’t quite know what town I’m even in right now,” Mallory responded, “I’m trying to find a certain man, who should be able to help me find my birth parents.”

“What’s the man’s name? Perhaps I could help you find him.”

“His name is Thomas Walters-- ever heard of him?”

The woman suddenly froze. “Thomas is a bad man. Thomas is a bad, bad man. Don’t look for Thomas, don’t look for him I tell you!” With more energy and speed than Mallory thought possible for the woman’s tiny frame, the woman bolted out of the room as quick as lightning, with a crazed expression, and entered another room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Stunned and unsure what to do, Mallory walked through the house until she found an open, unlocked bedroom and quickly put down her sopping wet things, as the snow had melted into everything she had on her. The room seemed dusty and untouched for many years. The paint on the walls was peeling, but it seemed to have once been a room meant for a small child. Did the old woman have a child? There had been no signs of other occupants of the house yet, but because of the largeness of the residence, it would barely surprise Mallory if someone else did live here. As she made her way into the room, she briefly noticed that dust balls and cobwebs

covered much of the room. However, she could barely complain, being thankful to just have a place to sleep in for the night. Stripping into the driest pair of clothes she could find, Mallory slipped into the bed and slept soundly until the next morning.

After having a satisfying rest after a not so satisfying day, Mallory went downstairs to the kitchen where the aroma of pancakes came wafting out. Her day's journey without food had left her famished, and now with the smell of something delicious drifting into her nose, her stomach growled, leading the way into the kitchen where the old woman stood hunched over the stove, flipping pancakes in a pan.

"I've always loved pancakes ever since I was a little girl," Mallory said, "would it be alright if I stayed for breakfast?"

"Yes, help yourself to as many pancakes as you want! Come, hurry before they get cold!" the woman gestured to the table, and Mallory sat down, pleased to see that there were already two plates of pancakes set out. As she reached for one plate, she noticed that the woman had pulled out another plate from a cabinet and quickly loaded two pancakes onto it. She then proceeded to hand the steaming plate to Mallory. Confused, Mallory accepted the plate, but quickly forgot about it as she bit into the tasty food. The woman stared at Mallory while she devoured the food given to her, taking in her every move, every action. "I told you yesterday that you shouldn't look for Thomas Walters, and I stand by my statement. He is a bad, bad man and a nice, young girl like you shouldn't be looking for a beast like him," the old woman said.

"You have been nothing but welcoming and kind to me, but I really must find Thomas Walters. He is the only lead I have to finding my parents. I must go soon."

"N-n-no! NO! You will NOT leave and find Thomas Walters!" the woman fled out of the kitchen, the crazed expression returning once again. After a few minutes, a door was shut. What was she doing? Perhaps she just went into that room of hers again. Mallory shrugged, and finished off the rest of her pancakes.

As Mallory bundled herself up in her coat and boots, she called out a thank you and goodbye as she crossed the main entrance. No response, as expected. Mallory twisted the doorknob, anticipating the cold weather that was soon to hit her face. But the door jammed. Mallory tried again. The door still wouldn't open. She realized that the door had somehow gotten locked on the inside, preventing her exit. Mallory began to try the rest of the doors in the big

house, even the windows. Everything was locked from the inside. Anger slowly building up in her chest, Mallory stormed to the room the old woman had gone into the night before.

“Unlock the doors! I need to leave. Please, miss, I need to go.” No response came from the other side. Mallory knocked on the door, kept shouting, trying to get the woman to respond. Still nothing. Exhaling sharply, Mallory twisted the doorknob forcefully, expecting it to be locked. To her surprise, the door creaked open. Battling between her curiosity and conscience, the curiosity eventually won over. Mallory warily stepped into the room that had become the old woman’s haven.

The first thing she noticed were the pictures on the walls. The walls were covered by what seemed like portraits and photographs of the same person, a man, all framed with a same gold design and evenly spaced apart. Peeling her eyes away from them, the next thing Mallory noticed were the envelopes. Envelopes upon envelopes littered the room- they were on the ground, on the table, on the couch. Mallory picked a handful up, and saw them all labeled with just one name in the middle- Jakob. No address, no stamp. Just the name Jakob, written neatly in the middle of every single envelope. As she neared a table that stood in the middle of the room, Mallory found multiple written letters that had not yet been sealed. All began the same way: “Dearest Jakob, everyday I miss you more and more, but I know you will return soon and we will be united again forever...” the letter then went on about the woman’s life, and at the end she always signed with “forever devoted to you, Claudia”. After sifting through countless love letters to this Jakob, Mallory found a newspaper clipping, with the headline **PLANE CRASH KILLS ALL**. Reading through the brief article, Mallory discovered that a plane had crashed into a mountain range due to technical failures, and the pilot was a man by the name of Jakob Porter. Was the old woman writing to her dead husband every day? Suddenly, the second plate of pancakes on the table that morning made sense. They weren’t meant for her, but Jakob. Overwhelmed, Mallory didn’t register the shuffling of the old woman’s slippers as she entered the room. It wasn’t until the old woman let out a bloodcurdling scream in which Mallory snapped out of her shock of recent events.

“I give you a place to stay, I warn you against bad people, and you dare come in and intrude upon my room?!” fists flying, the old woman launched herself at Mallory, only to lose her balance and fall onto the ground headfirst. Blood streaming from her forehead, it dawned on Mallory that the old woman would not make it to see another day. Instead of relaxing and

peacefully giving into death, the old woman frantically reached for Mallory and with her dying breaths, struggled to say to Mallory, “He took her away from me.” She then reached into her dress pocket, pulled out an envelope identical to the others in the room, and shakily placed it into Mallory’s trembling hands. With that, the old woman released her grip and finally got what she wanted- reunion with her Jakob.

Mallory still hadn’t quite processed the events that had just unfolded before her. What had the woman meant by her last words? Trying her best to compose herself, Mallory took a deep, shaky breath, and opened the envelope.

October 31st, 1989

Dearest Jakob,

Everyday I miss you more and more, but I know you will return soon and we will be united again forever, and we can finally live out our future like we always dreamed. Today, Thomas came over to visit! Do you remember Thomas, your dear friend? You two always did seem to bond over your personal piloting accounts. As I waited for his arrival, I believed he was coming over with the intentions of chatting and catching up, but instead he seemed extremely tense and on edge about something. Throughout his entire visit, he kept patting the breast pocket of his jacket, as if constantly checking if he had something. Finally, I laughed and asked him to please, just tell me what was bothering him so much. I was surprised to see him tense up, until he finally reached into the breast pocket and pulled out an envelope.

“I need you to sign this Claudia. It’s a consent form for adoption. You may not know it, but ever since Jakob passed, you’ve become mentally unstable. Chaotic. It’s not healthy for your child to be in this environment,” I remember him saying, in a clipped voice. At that moment, I no longer saw him as a friend, but an evil man taking away our beautiful daughter from me. I must have blacked out, as that’s all I remembered.

But Jakob, when I came to, Thomas had left, but our daughter is gone as well! The consent form is nowhere to be found, but do you think Thomas would be capable of forging my signature? I don’t know what to do Jakob, a monster has taken our beautiful angel away, a monster that we used to trust and admire! Oh Jakob, now is when I wish you were with me the most. I feel so alone, so alone. Oh Jakob my love, please come back...

Forever devoted to you,

Claudia

Something else fell out of the envelope. Reaching for it, Mallory noticed a rip on one side of the picture. With quivering hands, Mallory flipped over the piece of paper. A smiling little girl stared up towards Mallory, a girl with the same face Mallory had seen countless times in photos hung on the walls at her old “home”. Past and present collided with sudden force, their eyes boring into each other as Mallory saw a reflection of herself. The only sound that occurred in the room was a sob, as Mallory remained, finally returning to the home she had been searching for.